The Names of God

أسماء الله الحسنى

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In any discussion about the Names of God, it is important to understand that Muslims believe in One True God, the only Creator, the One Who has Dominion over all that exists, has ever existed or will come to exist. A Muslim worships the same One God whom all the Prophets worshipped.

"...were you witnesses when death approached Jacob? When he said unto his sons, 'What will you worship after me?' They said, 'We shall worship your God, the God of your fathers, Abraham, Ishmael and Isaac, One God, and to Him we submit (in Islam)." (Quran 2:133)

The Prophets of Islam include the same Prophets present in Jewish and Christian traditions; they all came to their people with the same message – to recognize and to worship the One God. Judaism and Christianity in their original form and also Islam as we know it today, astogether are all from this One True God. However, Islam revealed to the Prophet Muhammad is the completion of God's revelations to all of mankind. After realising this, it becomes equally important to understand that Islam totally rejects any notion that God has partners or associates, or that He in some way combines with men or animals to form a deity of any sort. God is God, the One, the Only. "...**there is nothing like Him." (Quran 42:11)**

Muslims believe in the One Unique, Merciful God, the sole Creator and Sustainer of the Universe and they call him by His revealed Name – Allah. In this age of mass communication and unfettered technological advancement, there is scarcely a single human being who has not heard this word and understood that it forms part of the belief system that is Islam. However perhaps some confusion arises, and people may wonder who Allah is.

In Arabic, Allah means the One True God worthy of all submission and devotion. Jewish and Christian Arabs refer to God as Allah, and He is the same One True God referred to in the Biblical passage **"Hear O Israel, the Lord your God is One".**

(Deuteronomy 6.4 & Mark 12.29) The word God is spelled and pronounced differently in many languages: the French call him Dieu, the Spanish, Dios and the Chinese refer to the One God as Shangdi; nevertheless. the God of the monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) are the same.

The differences and confusions arise because the word "God" can be made plural as in gods, or change gender, as in goddess. This is not the case in Arabic. The word Allah stands alone, there is no plural or gender. The use of the words He or Him are grammatical only and in no way indicate that Allah has any form of gender that is comprehensible to us. Allah is unique and He does not share His name with what can describe idols. His name is unchangeable. Allah describes Himself to us in the Quran:

"Say (O Muhammad): He is Allah, (the Unique) One. Allah, the Eternal (Foundation). [1] He begets not, nor was He begotten; and there is none co-equal or comparable unto Him." (Quran 112)

A Muslim is one who has surrendered to God and is in no doubt that, He is the One and Only Creator. A Muslim is grateful for all the bounties and blessings bestowed upon him by God, he looks around and observes the wonders of the universe. A Muslim marvels at the depth of the oceans and the delicate petals of a flower. However, this belief is not the only thing required by a Muslim, he must also know with certainty it is God alone that deserves to be worshipped. He has no partners, no equals, and no sons or daughters.

He is God – Allah. The entire universe bears witness to His Oneness. Indeed when contemplating the universe, from the lowliest grain of sand to the mighty and majestic mountains, one can see the Magnificence of God. This vast universe is running according to a precise system, everything in its correct place, created in the right proportions. The sun rises and casts its glow

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1 In Arabic "Samad" (The Self-Sufficient Master, Whom all creatures need, He neither eats nor drinks)

upon us, the flowers bloom and life springs from tiny inanimate seeds. God has given every part of creation what it needs, and He has guided it to what is most suitable. All of creation is in need of Him, yet He is in need of none. Every creation has a purpose and fulfilling that purpose acknowledges the rights of the Creator. God said in the Quran that He did not create us except that we should worship Him **(Quran 51:56)** and that is His right over us.

The first principle and focal point of Islam is this belief in God, and the whole of the Quran is dedicated to this. It speaks directly about God and His Essence, Names, Attributes and Actions. God is mentioned in the Quran, by one or another of His Names or Attributes, 10,062 times. The greatest of God's names is Allah.

"Allah! (None has the right to be worshipped but He)! To Him belong the Best Names." (Quran 20:8)

"And (all) the Most Beautiful Names belong to Allah, so call on Him by them, and leave the company of those who belie or deny (or utter impious speech against) His Names." (Quran 7:180)

A Muslim is encouraged to remember God and be grateful to Him at all times and one easy, yet beneficial way of doing this, is to contemplate and understand His Beautiful Names. Through these names, we are able to know our Creator and learn how to praise and worship Him, and to call on Him by the Names that are indicative of our needs.

When making supplication, the Prophet Muhammad is known to have said, "O God, I ask you of you by every name that You have named yourself, or that You have revealed in Your book, or that You have taught any of Your creation or that You have kept hidden in the unseen knowledge with Yourself." **(*Ahmad*)** Thus, His Names are not limited to what He has revealed in the Quran or to the traditions of Prophet Muhammad.

God says in the Quran: **"Verily! I am Allah! None has the right to be worshipped but I, so worship Me..." (Quran**

20:14). To worship God one must know God. We gain real and everlasting benefit from this knowledge. It increases faith and allows ones heart to become attached to the Most Powerful, the Most Wise, the Most Merciful and the Most Just, Allah.

In the name of God (Allah), the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful.

This article begins in the same way Muslims begin with many undertakings. Before commencing even the most mundane tasks of life, eating, drinking, dressing, or bathing, a Muslim will turn his efforts into worship by mentioning the name of God. He (God) is the Most Gracious and the Most Merciful, His mercy encompasses all things, and is the source of all the compassion and mercy that exist. God says to us in the Quran, **"My Mercy embraces all things..." (Quran 7:156)**

From the sayings of Prophet Muhammad, we know that when God decreed the creation He said, **"…and My Mercy overcomes My Wrath."** ***(Saheeh Bukhari and Muslim)*** What exactly is mercy? The dictionary defines it as disposition to be kind and forgiving, and the feeling that motivates compassion. [2] The Arabic term for mercy is *rahmah* and two of the most important names of God derive from this root word. *Ar Rahman* – the Most Gracious and *Ar Raheem* – the Most Merciful. The Mercy of God is that ethereal quality that embodies gentleness, piety, care, consideration, love and forgiveness. When these qualities are observable in this world, they are a mere reflection of God's mercy towards his creation.

Prophet Muhammad informed us that God is more merciful to His creatures than a mother is to her child, ***(Saheeh Bukhari and Muslim)*** and in fact, the Arabic word for womb, *raheem*, is

2 Princeton Wordnet.

derived from the same root word as mercy -*rahmah*. It is significant that there is a unique connection between God's mercy and the womb. God nurtures and shelters us, just as the womb nurtures and shelters the unborn child.

Prophet Muhammad explained the quality of mercy to his companions, telling them God has one hundred parts of mercy, and has sent down one part to be shared amongst the creation. This is why people are compassionate and kind towards one another and wild animals treat their offspring with gentleness. However, God withheld the other 99 parts to be bestowed upon the believers on the Day of Judgement. ***(Saheeh Muslim)***

All of creation shows love and compassion towards one another with just this one portion of mercy. Humans give willingly to the poor and needy, families support and love one another, and animals protect their young. Mercy and compassion generally take into account the need to alleviate suffering and to spread kindness and joy. Even though this world sometimes appears to be a dark and gloomy place, the Mercy of God can be seen and felt by those who ponder and reflect. The rain falls, the sun shines, a child reaches for her father's hand and the kitten snuggles into the protective warmth of its mother. God's mercy is strong and visible all around us, yet on the Day of Judgement He will complete this mercy by adding the final 99 parts and bestowing mercy, love and compassion upon those believers who did righteous deeds and tried to please God in all their affairs. This concept is awe inspiring; the mercy of God knows no bounds.

As a sign of God's infinite mercy towards mankind, He sent Prophets and Messengers to guide us and help us to remain on His straight path leading to eternal Paradise. God said He did not send Prophet Muhammad to the whole of mankind, except as a mercy.

"And We have sent you (O Muhammad) not but as a mercy for the all that exists." (Quran 21:107)

Prophet Muhammad was the embodiment of mercy; he showed compassion to those around him, his family, orphans, friends and strangers. God spoke to him saying:

"And by the Mercy of God, you dealt with them gently. And had you been severe and harsh hearted, they would have broken away from about you; so pass over (their faults), and ask (God's) Forgiveness for them; and consult them in the affairs." (Quran 3:159)

Prophet Muhammad could often be heard invoking God's Mercy on the believers, and Muslims greet each other by saying *Assalamu alaikum wa Rahmatullah* (May God's Peace and Mercy be upon you.) Mercy and all it involves is a very important concept in Islam because from it stem generosity, respect, tolerance and forgiveness, all qualities that a Muslim is expected to cultivate in this life.

As frail human beings we often feel lost and alone in a world that seems bereft of mercy and it is in those times that we need to turn to God and seek His Mercy and Forgiveness. When we turn to Him in true submission His tranquillity descends upon us and we are able to feel the quality of His mercy and see it manifest in the world around us.

The hand that reaches out to you in the darkness is a reflection of God's mercy, so too is the kind word from a stranger, the rain that falls on parched earth and the laughter in the eyes of a child. God's mercy is the source of all that is good, gentle, or pious. God has enabled us to understand some measure of His Magnificence by revealing His Most Beautiful Names to us, He has several that indicate His Mercy and we are encouraged to call upon Him by these names.

Al-Rahman (the Most Gracious), *al-Raheem* (the Most Merciful), *al-Barr* (the Source of Goodness), *al-Kareem* (the Most

Generous), *al-Jawaad* (the Generous), *al-Ra'oof* (the Compassionate), *al-Wahhaab* (the Bestower).

"And (all) the Most Beautiful Names belong to God so call on Him by them..." (Quran 7:180)

We can call upon Him by these names when we feel the need to give thanks for the countless blessings God has bestowed upon us, or in our hour of need. We crave for the Mercy of God most keenly when we are in need of comfort and security. When the transience of this world appears to have rendered us powerless, the Most Powerful (God) will always, and forever cover us with His Mercy and He asks in return, only that we believe in Him and worship Him alone.

God (Allah) has many names, and all of them indicate His Greatness, His Perfection and His Majesty. Prophet Muhammad said **"God has ninety-nine names, one hundred less one; whoever learns them will enter Paradise."** [3] Learning involves not only memorisation but also appreciating their meanings and calling God with them.

Learning and thus knowing God's names leads mankind to understand that he was created to worship God Alone and to live according to God's commandments. This knowledge allows mankind to put into action his understanding of God and inspires him to live a life of righteousness. Understanding the meanings of God's names liberates mankind from worshipping any part of the Creation.

When a person learns that God is *al-Ahad* (The One and Unique), he will not equate anything else with Him; when he learns that He is *al-Razzaaq* (The Provider), he will not seek provision from anyone else; when he learns that He is *al-Ghafar* (The All forgiving), it will be to God Alone that he turns for forgiveness.

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3 Saheeh Al-Bukhari

Prophet Muhammad emphasised the importance of calling on God by His Most Beautiful names. In his own supplications to God, he is known to have said, **"Oh God, I ask you of you by every name that You have named yourself, or that You have revealed in Your book, or that You have taught any of Your creation, or that You have kept hidden in the unseen knowledge with Yourself."** [4] We are encouraged to call upon God by the name that is specific to the kind of care and help we need. [5]

The name *Rubb* (Lord, Cherisher) is repeated in many verses of the Quran. The Rubb guides and cares for all of the believers; He manages their affairs and bestows blessings as He wills. In the English language, there is no real equivalent for the word Rubb. It is often translated as Lord, but this word does not do justice to the breadth and depth of meaning found in the Arabic word Rubb. It means the One the Only Lord of the entire universe, its Creator, Sustainer, Cherisher and Giver of security.

The names *Al-Hakeem* (The Wise) and *Al-Hakam* (The Judge) indicate God is the source of all wisdom, in His creation and in His commands, and He is the Judge of all things. He is the One Who created everything, and therefore He alone knows the true wisdom in it's creation. He judges between mankind by His Law, His decree and His reward or punishment. He judges with fairness and does not oppress anyone the slightest. No person is made to bear the sin of another. God is just in all His decisions.

"… And who is better in judgement than God for a people who have firm Faith." (Quran 5:50)

"God will judge between you on the Day of Resurrection about that wherein you used to differ." (Quran 22:69)

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4 Ahmad, classified Saheeh by Al Bani

5 The following definitions are derived from Tayseer al-Kareem al-Rahmaan fi Tafseer Kalaam al-Mannaan by Shaykh 'Abd al-Rahmaan al-Sa'di.

God's name *Al-Quddoos* (The Holy) indicates the One Who is Blessed and Pure. The angels sanctify Him, and He is praised for His virtues and goodness. God is The Holy because He is far above having any opposites, rivals, partner or son. He is perfect, having no faults or shortcomings. He is far above anything being near Him or like Him in any aspect:

"… There is nothing like unto Him…" (Quran 42:11)

and,

"And there is none co-equal or comparable unto Him." (Quran 112:4)

Amongst God's names are *Al-Mu'ti* (The Giver) and *Al-Maani'* (The Withholder). None can withhold what He gives, and none can give what He withholds. He is the One Who gives to whomever He wills and withholds from whomever He wills.

Prophet Muhammad said to one of his young companions:

"Know that if all were to gather together to benefit you with anything, they would benefit you only with something that Allah had already prescribed for you. And if they gather together to harm you with anything, they would harm you only with something Allah had already prescribed for you." *(At Tirmidi)*

God is *Al-Shaakir* (The Grateful) and *Al-Shakoor* (The Appreciative). He is the One Who appreciates even the smallest deed, and He forgives the greatest mistakes. He increases good deeds and appreciates those who give Him thanks. God remembers those who remember Him.

"And they will say: 'All the praises and thanks be to Allah, Who has removed from us (all) grief. Verily, our Lord is indeed Oft Forgiving, Most Ready to appreciate (good deeds and to recompense).'" (Quran 35:34)

From the sayings of Prophet Muhammad, we learn:

“God has written down the good deeds and the bad ones. He who has intended a good deed and has not done it, God writes it down as a full good deed, but if he has intended it and has done it, God writes it down as from ten good deeds to seven hundred times, or many times over. But if he has intended a bad deed and has not done it, God writes it down as a full good deed, but if he has intended it and has done it, God writes it down as one bad deed.” *(Saheeh Al-Bukhari, Saheeh Muslim)*

God is the One who guides mankind to the way that will benefit them and He protects them. God is *Al-Haadi* (The Guide). He is the only source of guidance and the One from whom all Protection emanates. God’s guidance causes hearts to fill with piety and righteousness. He is the guiding light in the darkness.

“But Sufficient is your Lord as a Guide and Helper.” (Quran 25:31)

These are just a few of the Names of God that can be found in the Quran and in the authentic sayings of Prophet Muhammad. You will find many of these Names and attributes at the end of verses in the Quran. When we reach out to God, He reaches out to us. When we call on Him, He listens and responds. When speaking about God – Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful, Prophet Muhammad said that Allah calls out to His creation in the final third of the night, saying:

“Who is saying a prayer to Me that I may answer it? Who is asking something of Me that I may give it him? Who is asking forgiveness of Me that I may forgive him?” [6]

6 Saheeh Al-Bukhari, Saheeh Muslim, Malik, At Tirmidi, Abu Dawud